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ABSTRACT

The task of setting up and administering educational programs for the American Indian has been fraught with seemingly insurmountable problems and inbuilt frustrations for both the Indian population and the Federal Government. Many programs are now under way to increase Indian control of Indian affairs, including their own educational institutions. The Institute of American Indian Arts makes special curriculum provisions geared to the special needs of Indian youth in an attempt to turn the potential disadvantage of the cultural transition to advantage and to stimulate extensions of American Indian expressions in the arts. The underlying philosophy of the program is that unique cultural tradition can be honored and can be used creatively as the springboard to a meaningful contemporary life. The institute plans its programs around the special needs of the individual and attempts continuously to expand its understanding of student problems as they emanate from Indian cultural origins. The school offers an accredited high school program with emphasis on the arts, and a college level program as preparation for college and technical schools and employment in arts-related vocations. The age range of the student body is from 15 to 27. This method of dealing with Indian minority problems seems to hold promise of being an effective education approach for dealing with the needs of other minority groups. (BD)

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CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AS THE BASIS FOR CREATIVE EDUCATION AT THE INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN INDIAN ARTS

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The basic goal of the traditional American educational system has been to prepare all individuals to function effectively in an average middle class society. But, ideal as this goal may be, the processes of mass education do not always lend themselves to singular problems and since this country is comprised of varied groups requiring singular attention, some failures are inevitable. Over a period of time, these have occurred in sufficient number and with sufficient force to cause general concern and give rise to questioning from many quarters as to the soundness of the principles involved. Efforts are now being made on a wide front to reconsider the goals and the methods and to search out new educational approaches that will better solve the problems of special groups. This is a particularly urgent cause in the case of education for the North American Indian. The task of setting up and administering educational programs for the American Indian has been fraught with seemingly insurmountable problems and inbuilt frustrations for both the Indian population of the country and the Federal Government. The circumstances need to be examined briefly in order to understand past failures and present needs.

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The American Indian has never truly subscribed to the Common American Middle Class Dream, largely because of the fundamental differences existing between his life-goals and those of society at large. The Indian value system always has been centered on the idea that man should seek to blend his existence into the comparatively passive rhythms of nature, as opposed to the dominant society's quest for control of nature through scientific manipulation of its elements. This schism, alone, has been a formidable barrier to the establishment of a constructive interrelationship between the protagonists.

Another factor with important bearing on the Indian's negative reaction to some of the general goals set forth for him has been his original indigenous relationship to the land of America, his position and attitudes in this respect being dramatically different from those of the immigrant groups by whom he was eventually surrounded. Psychologically, the American Indian generally has remained aloof from the melting pot concept upon which this country was structured.

The language barrier must be placed high on the list of circumstances which have worked to the detriment of both the Indian and the Government. The grammar and semantics of Indian languages differ so widely from English that they impede communication and are a major deterrent to successful education for the Indian child who, on entering school, has to contend with the requirements of a curriculum based in English which,

to him, is a strange and uncomfortable foreign language. The child has difficulty learning under these conditions, not because he is unintelligent but, rather, because the educational offering has not been structured to his special needs.

The heterogeneous makeup of the Indian population has been the source of many frustrations for Indian and Anglo, alike. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census the Indian population in 1970 numbered 827,091 and according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs this number sorts itself into 260 separate Indian tribes, bands, villages, pueblos and groups in states other than Alaska eligible for Federal help, and in addition 216 Native Alaskan communities. The job of creating and administering programs of health, education and welfare for such diverse groups as these, with language barriers and culturally unique concepts of life, can hardly be viewed as an easy one. And, unfortunately, some early efforts of the Government to bridge the many gaps proceeded erroneously, based on the premise that the Indian, if given the opportunity, would relinquish his "Indianness" sooner or later and fit himself into the overall plan of American life. History points sadly to the flaws in this assumption.

For the past century the Indian has clung tenaciously to his way of life and has managed to quietly reject any event that seemed to threaten it. Overtures made in his behalf which did not fit <u>his</u> sense of need were frequently received with submerged hostility, often manifested by

the kind of deadly passivity that kills any cooperative program far more effectively than open warfare. This kind of a situation amounts to an impasse; with the Indians on one hand being labeled: unresponsive; and the Government on the other hand being labeled: inept; and with neither side achieving constructive goals.

Social and technological changes, and the rapidity with which they have occurred have made the old Indian way of life increasingly difficult to maintain. The Indian finds himself pressured on many fronts, particularly economically to fall in line and cope with changes, but in many cases and for obvious reasons he is ill-equipped to do so. President Nixon, in his message to the Congress, July 8, 1970, recognized these present conditions:

> "The first Americans - the Indians - are the most deprived and most isolated minority group in our nation. On virtually every scale of measurement - employment, income, education, health - the condition of the Indian people ranks at the bottom....
>
> "It is long past time that the Indian policies of the Federal government began to recognize and build upon the capacities and insights of the Indian people."

This official awareness is encouraging, and many program moves are now under way to increase Indian control of Indian affairs, including their own educational institutions. Many schools have moved to, or are moving toward, having their own Indian advisory school boards, and a few actually exercise control of funds and programs used in the education of their children.

This official awareness is encouraging and one can feel hope in the fact that many plans are being initiated to overcome the problems. Experimental kindergarten workshops are now being conducted where the pupil's Native language is used as a preliminary to the introduction of English; new opportunities in adult education have been provided in many areas; stepped-up programs in vocational training and bringing industry to the reservations are two of the Government's major efforts toward alleviating the unemployment problem; and the Indian population for its part, has an awakened attitude toward matters of self-determination.

Also, the Federal Government has recognized, with some alarm, the possible dissipation of American Indian art forms as a National resource. In response to the advice of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, the Bureau of Indian Affairs is working on new programs concerned with Native culture in Alaska as well as in the rest of the United States.

In establishing the Institute of American Indian Arts nine years ago, the Bureau recognized the special needs of Indian youth and provided an institution which was set up to make special curriculum provisions geared to their particular needs, in an attempt to turn the potential disadvantage of the cultural transition to advantage and to stimulate extensions of American Indian expressions in the arts.

The underlying philosophy of the program is that unique cultural tradition can be honored and can be used creatively as the springboard to a meaningful contemporary life.

The Institute holds that cultural differences are a rich wellspring from which may be drawn new creative forces relevant to contemporary conditions and environments. We believe that, ultimately, by learning to link the best in Indian culture to contemporary life, the young Indian will be able to solve his own problems and enrich the world scene in the process.

We do not believe that it is possible for anyone to live realistically while shut in by outmoded tradition. We do believe that each generation must evolve its own art forms to reflect its own times and conditions, rather than turn to the hopeless prospect of mere remanipulation of the past. The Indian artist who draws on his own tradition to evolve new art forms learns to stand on his own feet, artistically, avoiding stultifying cliches applied to Indian art by purists who, sometimes unwittingly, resent any evolution of forms, techniques, and technology in Indian art.

In general, the Institute plans its programs around the special needs of the individual, as best these can be determined. It attempts continuously to expand its understanding of student problems as they

emanate from Indian cultural origins. The goal of the programs is to develop educational methods which will assist young Indian people to enter contemporary society with pride, poise, and confidence.

The school offers an accredited high school program with emphasis on the arts, and a college level program as preparation for college and technical schools and employment in arts-related vocations. The age range of the student body is from 15 to 27.

Many of our students suffer from cultural conflict and economic deprivation. They are beset with misunderstandings regarding race, color and religion; and are lost in a labyrinth, in search of identity; they are stung by memories of discrimination. Among them are the revolutionists, the nonconformists, and the unacademically-minded who find no satisfaction in the common goals set for them in the typical school program. They typify that percentage of creative individuals to be found in all cultural groups who seek new ways of self-expression and who are bent on searching out very personal and creative approaches to problem solving. Holding standards which are at odds with the majority, they reject and are rejected by the typical school program.

Without the opportunity to attend a school catering to their particular drives, such students are most likely to join ranks with the growing

number of dropouts who represent one of today's major problems in education. Such misfits, when measured in terms of their ultimate contributions to humanity, very often stand in indictment of a system which categorically has excluded them.

In contemplation of his immediate position, the Indian youth may easily view himself as a sorely disadvantaged, second-rate citizen -- and act accordingly. He may tend to equate his problems with the simple fact of being Indian and may, consciously or subconsciously, reject himself and engage in acts of self-denigration such as drinking to excess, flaunting the law, fighting publicly, and other antisocial behavior; or, he may go to the other extreme and take refuge in "Indianism", seeking to live in an atmosphere of complete chauvinism and false pride, in which case he may withdraw in a state of indifference and lethargy; or, he may be astride a fence, torn in both directions, in a state of complete frustration.

At the same time, the Indian youth shares in the general concerns of the typical American teen-ager; he wears mod clothes, does the latest dances, engages in TV hero worship, and is generally cognizant of the significant youth movements of search and protest. In short, he has all the problems common to the youth of this era and, in addition, the difficult problem of making a satisfactory psychological reconciliation between the mores of two cultures.

In all cases, the Institute's primary goal is to give the student a basis for genuine pride and self-acceptance. At the outset and at a very personal level, he is made aware of the fact that we know, in general, what his problems are, and that we are on hand to discuss them with him and look into what can be done to help in his particular circumstances; he is made aware of the fact that we respect him both as an individual and as an Indian and that we cherish his cultural traditions. The school operates in a general aura of honor and appreciation for the Indian parent and the world he represents.

All students at the Institute are oriented in the history and aesthetics of Indian accomplishments in the arts. They view exhibitions of the choicest collections of fine Indian art pieces, listen to lectures with slides and films covering the archaeology and ethnology of Indian cultures, and take field trips into the present-day cultural areas of the Southwest groups. They are encouraged to identify with their total heritage, harkening back to the classic periods of South and Central American cultures -- heydays of artistic prowess in the New World. And they are exposed to the arts of the world, to give them a basis for evaluating and appreciating the artistic merits of the contributions made by their ancestors. Each student is led to investigate the legends, dances, materials, and activities pertaining to the history of his own particular tribe.

Through this process, he gradually increases his awareness of himself as a member of a race tremendously rich in cultural accomplishments and gains a feeling of self-worth.

In a curriculum unusually rich in art courses, a student, who may have become dulled to the excitement of personal accomplishment as a result of unsatisfactory experiences with academic subjects in his early years, can be revitalized through the experience of creative action. He may have an undiscovered aptitude for music, dancing, or drama; a natural sense of color and design, a sensitivity for three-dimensional form, or a way with words. All students at the Institute elect studio art courses. Sooner or later, with a great deal of sensitive cooperation on the part of the faculty, a field is found in which a student can "discover" himself. His first successful fabric design, ceramic bowl, piece of sculpture, or performance on stage may be his very first experience with the joy of personal accomplishment. His reaction is one of justifiable pride, and sometimes a shade of disbelief, at having produced something of worth, and he equates it with his own personal worth. For him, this is a great personal discovery. It is, also, a most potent form of motivation toward personal growth.

To date, our approach is happily justified in a look at the progress of young Indian students at the Institute. Art critics of stature are excited by the work. The quality of design and workmanship, equal

in its own way to the finest traditional approaches, is easily discernible in the work being produced in sculpture, painting, and the various crafts. New sources of richness and beauty are reflected in poetry and prose. Early developments in drama and music are gratifying.

As impressive as these results are in terms of artistic accomplishments, the real value of the program lies in the general personal growth of the student and in his discovery of newly found strength and its carry-over into his academic efforts and social behavior.

A continuous effort is made in the Academic Department to find more effective ways to correct the academic deficiencies all too common to Indian students who come from the disadvantaged backgrounds previously explained. Special attention is given to students who have problems in verbalization, traumatic detachment, and low self-images. New approaches are sought continuously for expanding intellectual growth based upon ways compatible with the cultural mores of the student's background.

In the dormitories, living conditions are planned especially to broaden the student's exposure to the behavioral expectations of a contemporary society. Here, he learns the social amenities necessary to democratic living in the world at large as well as within his own cultural group.

As a result of these procedures, most students seem to gain self-affirmation. They emerge strengthened, proud, and confident, exercising newly found powers of self-direction. In 1971, 54% of all students completing work in the 12th, 13th and 14th grades enrolled in colleges or higher educational art schools elsewhere.

The Institute is moving (1971) toward gaining accreditation at the college level for its returning post high students, and professional courses are now offered in the training of young Indians to become cultural specialists in several areas: Teacher training, museum work, commercial arts related to special needs of Indians, film arts, and business approaches to the utilization of craft skills in jewelry, ceramics and sculpture. Professional courses for training in the performing arts, tourism and travel, and National Park positions are being readied to help young Indian adults, tapping heretofore neglected cultural resources in special programmatic curricular offerings not available in standard higher educational institutions elsewhere.

In summary, the Institute of American Indian Arts is embarked on an exploratory program, with many steps yet to be taken. We are aware that cultural change is always difficult, and even traumatic when it involves alteration of one's own traditional foundation in favor of new values -- especially when the latter emanate from an alien source.

But, we must assume that change is inevitable. Therefore, the need is to find ways to encompass it healthily, taking care to avoid the destruction of ethnic traditions.

Thus far in our job, we have found that by stressing cultural roots as a basis for creative expression and by offering a wide range of media in which to work, Indian students can be inspired to new personal strengths in dimensions heretofore unrealized. As a result of the Institute's heritage-centered approach, a gratifying number of its students do discover who they are and what it is they have to say to the world; and they develop the self-respect and confidence to express themselves accordingly. They are helped to function constructively, in tune with the demands of their contemporary environment but without having to sacrifice their cultural being on the altar of either withdrawal or assimilation.

This method of dealing with Indian minority problems seems to hold promise of being an effective educational approach for dealing with the needs of other minority groups in the United States and throughout the world, wherever similar problems prevail.

It cannot be overemphasized that the program at the Institute could not succeed without the presence of a sensitive, creative, alert faculty who are attuned to the youth of today and are immediately

empathetic; who appreciate and use wisely the great storehouse of positive ethnic forces that can be turned to the advantage of our Indian students.

Lloyd H. Now
Director